

Life in Australia

Koalas

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KOALAS



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KOALAS

Australia is the home of many unusual animals. There are kangaroos which leap across the open plains. There are platypuses which swim in the mountain streams. There are possums which scamper around the trees at night searching for food. But the quaintest and most lovable of all Australian animals are the koalas. These sleepy little creatures, swaying in the branches of Eucalyptus trees, are loved and admired by all Australians and visitors to the country, particularly children.

A young man walking in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney was the first white man to find a koala, in 1798, more than twenty years after Australia had been discovered. He said it was an animal 'which the natives call a *cullamine*, and resembles the sloth in America'. These natives were, of course, the Australian aborigines, and this is the first written account of the koala. It was not found earlier because the first explorers spent most of their time near the coast and did not go inland. The trees in which the koalas lived only grew in the mountains back from the coast.

Four years later a young Frenchman, whose name was

Barallier, was exploring in the same area. The natives brought him 'portions of a monkey which they called *colo*'. This native word *colo* is supposed to be the origin of the word koala. Koalas are sometimes called 'monkeys' or 'monkey bears' in the same area today. This is wrong, because they are not monkeys or bears. They carry their young ones around with them in a pouch when they are very young. Because of this they are called marsupials, derived from a word which means a pouch.

The first drawing of a koala appeared in a book called *Arcana* in 1810. It was there called a Koalo or New Holland Sloth, after the old name of Australia. The writer describes the koalas as 'uncouth, awkward and unwieldy' and 'senseless creatures'. The drawing in this book is a poor one and is not really like the koala as we know it today. He certainly did not know this lovely animal.

Koalas are grey, furry animals measuring about thirty inches in length. Because they huddle up so much in a tree, they appear to be smaller. Male koalas are usually a little bigger than the females. Their bodies are short and solid, and are covered with quite thick fur, which is not very long. The colour of the fur varies in the different areas where the animals live. In the northern State of Queensland, its colour is reddish-grey and the fur is shorter. In Victoria in the south, where it is cooler, the koalas are bigger and the fur is much thicker and more greyish in colour.



FINDING THE FIRST KOALA

These two separate kinds of koalas are considered by scientists to be different races of the same animal. They are known as the northern race and the southern race. In both areas, however, the throat and neck are usually white. The fur is frequently stained with oil marks from the juices of the eucalyptus leaves, which have been chewed for some time and then stored in the cheeks of the mouth. Some of this juice dribbles out from the side of the mouth of the koala and drops on to its chest. The cheek pouches stick

out like swellings and are easily seen when the koala is feeding. This staining usually has the smell of eucalyptus oil.

Most male koalas have another peculiar smell as well, which comes from glands on their chests. It is not known what this is for. Some people think it attracts other koalas. Others think the koala uses it to rub into a

tree so that he will know it again, a tree, perhaps with good leaves to eat.

The ears of the koala are large, round and upright, and are covered with long straight hair, brownish grey outside and white inside. Its nose is large, extending far back from the tip towards the eye. It is thinly covered with down, and is dark coloured, so that the animal has the appearance of having a large, black rubber nose.

Koalas are quite heavy for their size. A male weighs about twenty-four pounds and a female about eighteen. Sometimes you will find much heavier ones weighing as much as thirty pounds.

A koala usually lives on his own. During the day he will



A QUEENSLAND KOALA

be seen sleeping high up in the branches of a eucalyptus tree, known in Australia as a gum tree. Koalas have wonderful balance and even in the worst storm are not blown off the trees. They wake up at intervals during the day, take a bite at some of the young, juicy leaves nearby, and go off to sleep again. When evening comes, and during the night, they climb easily and surely from tree to tree feeding on the young shoots of these trees. Because they move about at night scientists call them nocturnal.

Koalas are normally very quiet and sleepy-looking. They never go looking for trouble; in fact they try to run away from danger. They can become very fierce, however, if they are frightened suddenly, or if they have a baby with them. When annoyed, they grunt quite loudly like a frightened pig, and can scratch very badly with their front claws, which are long and sharp. Koalas should never be handled by anybody unless their hands and arms are well protected.



A VICTORIAN KOALA

The male koala has a deep grunt, but the female makes a higher pitched sound. The noise sounds much louder and more frightening at night when everything else is quiet. Koalas actually express their moods by noise and looks. In a rage, he grunts and grizzles hoarsely; if hurt or frightened, he whimpers and cries like a child in pain. His face changes from charm to misery when he cries, and when he is angry, the innocent look changes to an open-mouthed angry look. He is at his best when perfectly quiet. Without any sign of fear, he gazes down from his tree, looking most surprised if he is disturbed. He has, on many occasions, been called 'baby face'.



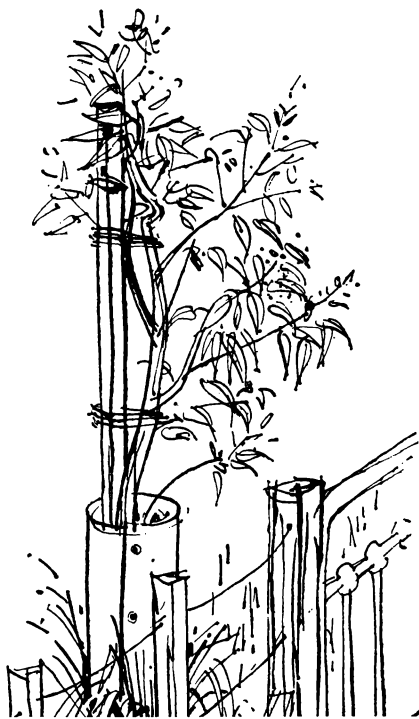
THE CLAWS ON A KOALA'S
FRONT LEG

Koalas love smooth-barked trees for climbing, but are good climbers in any eucalyptus trees. They climb very awkwardly, mainly using their front legs, which are very powerful. They dig their sharp claws into the bark, then jump upwards and sit still for a few seconds. After a short rest, they jump again and so climb up the tree in a jerky fashion, finally reaching the top where they are safe.

Their front legs have five claws, each claw being on a separate

toe. The koala has two of these toes very close together, and uses them as thumbs. Because of this feature, some children call the koala 'Mr Two Thumbs', and make up stories about them. The other three toes are quite wide part and are used to clutch the tree to get a good grip. While koalas can easily climb trees, they cannot climb over a hard, shiny surface because their claws cannot get a grip on this. Koalas can be stopped from climbing up any special tree we wish to save by nailing around the trunk of the tree some flat, shiny iron sheets about three feet long. It is important that the iron sheet goes completely around the tree, and does not leave any little piece of bark exposed.

Once up a tree, koalas can move quite steadily and easily, although they look clumsy. They climb from branch to branch looking for food or getting away from an enemy.



A TREE WITH AN IRON GUARD



A KOALA JUMPING FROM ONE TREE TO ANOTHER

They can even jump from one tree to another several yards away. If a tree with a koala in it is blown down during a storm, the koala usually jumps to safety just before the tree crashes to the ground. It then runs away on all fours in its quaint lumbering manner looking for another tree to climb.

Because they are usually found high up in trees, they cannot escape from forest fires in the area in which they live. Even if they get down from the trees before getting burnt, they are so slow in running on the ground that the fires quickly catch up to them and kill them.

Dogs and foxes attack and sometimes kill them if they are on the ground at night. Motor cars on country roads dazzle them with headlights, often knocking them over and either killing or injuring them.

Sometimes koalas make friends with other animals and become very attached to them, but this does not often happen. In one of the National Parks in Queensland, however, a koala rides round on the back of an Alsatian dog. Tourists visiting that National Park love to take photographs of the two animals together.

Koalas can swim in salt or fresh water if they have to escape from other animals or from forest fires, but this rarely happens as they do not like the water.

Living in trees all the time, one would think that koalas, like possums, would have tails to help them with their climbing. But normally they do not, and this is one of the special features of these animals. Sometimes there is a tiny little tail, which does not appear to help them in any way. Because they have no tail to worry them, they can easily sit or squat in comfort in the fork of a tree. This is the first place in a tree that all Australians would look in search of a koala. They may also be found in strange places such as the cross arms of a telegraph pole. In these places, they just sit and stare, without holding on with their claws thus showing their perfect sense of balance.

Koalas are revered by the aborigines who have many



myths and legends about them. There is one legend which tells of the time when koalas had tails and how they lost them. It concerns a kangaroo and a koala who were very friendly. They lived together, hunted together and were very proud of their long tails. There came a drought, however, and water became very scarce. The two friends camped near a water-hole which only contained dirty, smelly water. They grumbled a lot, but it saved them from dying of thirst. Finally, it dried up altogether and they did not know what to do. Then the kangaroo remembered that once he

A KOALA FRIGHTENED
BY A DOG

had seen his mother dig a deep hole in the sand in an old river bed, and water flowed into it. So they decided to try it out. However the sun was hot, and the koala was crafty, and he suggested that the kangaroo do the digging. The kangaroo started to dig, but no water came. When he asked the koala to help him, the koala again said that the sun was too hot and he felt ill. So the kangaroo kept on digging. Finally a trickle of water appeared, and then the hole became full of lovely fresh water. When he saw this, the greedy koala rushed over to the water, pushed the kangaroo out of the way, and bent down to drink the water, with his tail sticking out of the water-hole like a dry stick. The kangaroo was very angry, and picking up a boomerang, cut off the koala's tail. And so to this day the koala has no tail as evidence of his former laziness and cunning.

Koalas are fully grown when they are about four years old. Some have been known to live for twenty years, but on the average their life span is about twelve years. Young ones are born usually every year, during the spring and summer months. Even at breeding times, koalas do not live in groups and colonies, but stay on their own. Male koalas may seek out and mate with several females in one year, usually from September to January.

The young ones are born about four or five weeks later, and like most marsupials they are very tiny little creatures. When born, they are no more than three-quarters of an

six months before looking out into the world. During this time it lives on milk only, and the pouch is cleaned out by the mother every day with her tongue. The young one is then called a 'gum baby', is covered with fur and is about seven inches long. About this time it goes in and out of the pouch for another two or three months, coming and going as it likes, and learning to do things for itself. It is at this stage that it starts to eat gum leaves.

When she is rearing her young baby, the mother koala remains on her own. If another koala comes along at this time, there may be serious trouble and some fighting.

About eight months from the time it is born, the young koala leaves the pouch and does not return there. For the next six months it is either carried about on its mother's back, or hugged tightly to her when she is resting or if the weather is cold. On these occasions, mother and baby make an attractive and appealing picture.

They so attracted a well-known English writer, Dr Thomas Wood, that he wrote the following about them in his book *Cobbers*, which deals with Australia: 'The only more enchanting person than the koala is his wife with her baby. I lost my heart to her completely. To see them alone repays a voyage to Australia. They are the most enchanting little people that ever drew breath'. This Englishman said in a few words what the majority of people think about this unique animal.



CHILDREN IN HONG KONG WITH A TOY KOALA

Our koala has become a wonderful friend to children all over the world by means of the furry toy koalas now sold in many countries. They are particular favourites, with their large ears and beady eyes, in the United States and in the Far East. Probably no toy animal is loved more than the Australian koala.

When the young koala is twelve to fourteen months old, it leaves its mother, looks after itself and lives its own life, probably never seeing her again. For a while the young koala chooses a comfortable low fork in a tree in which to sleep during the day, but as it grows older it becomes more venturesome and moves farther up the tree.

In most cases, only one young koala is born at a time. Very rarely, two babies have been seen with the one mother. These may be twins, or else caused by the mother adopting another young one whose mother has died or deserted it. It must be hard work for a mother koala to carry two young ones around the branches and limbs of a tree.

White koalas have sometimes been seen, and are called albinos, a word meaning white. They are not as attractive as the normal coloured animals, and are considered to be curiosities. They live under the same conditions and environment as the others.

Koalas are very fussy about the food they eat. Most other animals eat a wide range of foods, natural or artificial, but koalas are very different. They eat only the leaves of a few different kinds (about twelve in all) of eucalyptus or gum trees. The tree they like best is the Manna Gum, *Eucalyptus viminalis*, and they eat this nearly all of the time. This tree grows to a hundred and fifty feet high, with long, narrow, hanging leaves containing plenty of oils which the koalas love. It grows both in the hills and along the coast-

line all the way from South Australia to Queensland, and so koalas are found in those areas. Koalas, like other animals, sometimes like to have a change in diet. They may eat a few pounds of other kinds of eucalyptus trees (the River Red Gum, the Yellow Box, the Swamp Gum and the Spotted Gum) but they soon get tired of them, and return to the Manna Gum.

If a koala from Victoria in the south is taken to Queensland in the north, it may refuse to eat the Queensland euca-



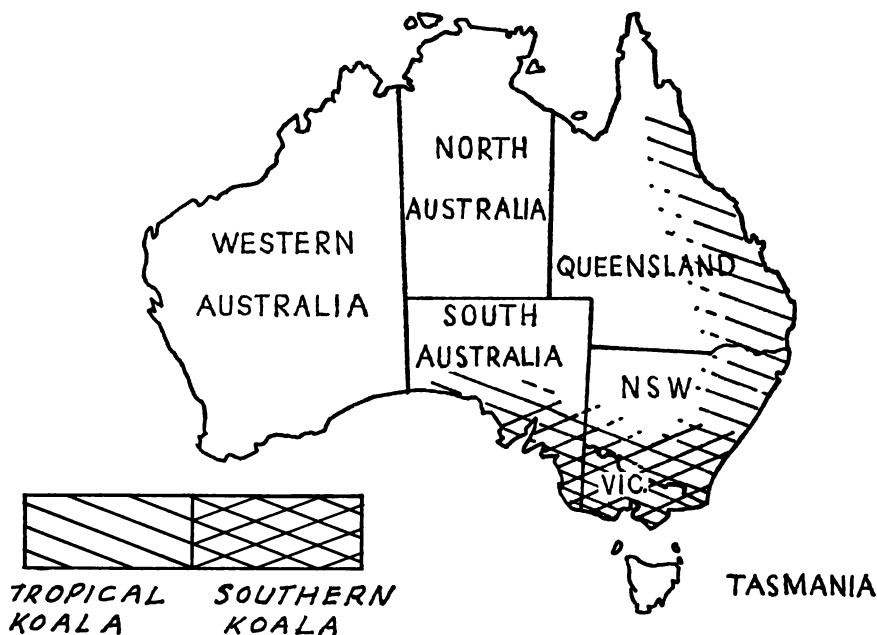
MANNA GUMS



A KOALA EATING GUM LEAVES

lyptus trees and die. This means that it is hard to move koalas to new areas a long way from their home, and sometimes they must be carefully changed over in their food from one district to another. It is important therefore to have large sanctuaries where koalas can live quietly and normally so that they will not die out.

Feeding on the sweet young leaves which grow at the tips of the branches, they do not bother about the older leaves. They stretch lazily towards the young leaves, grasp them firmly with one hand and pull them roughly towards their mouth. They may just nibble at one or two, and then refuse to eat any more; or they may eat the whole cluster of leaves, with their dreamy little eyes nearly closed. After eating for a while, they have a rest and start again. They are untidy eaters, and usually drop a lot of their food on the ground. This is one way of telling if there is a koala in a



A MAP SHOWING WHERE KOALAS ARE TO BE FOUND IN AUSTRALIA

particular tree. On an average each koala eats about two and a half to three pounds of fresh leaves every day. When they are eating they usually have a small piece of a leaf hanging out of their mouth, and from a distance this looks like their tongue.

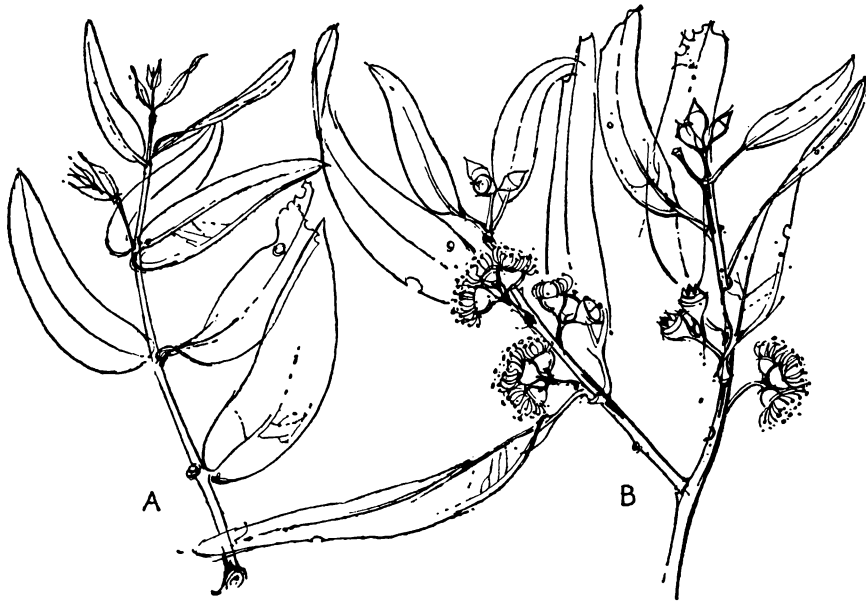
Because of the very special food that koalas eat, they have to eat large quantities to receive a proper diet. This

means that they have to have special organs to digest all this food. As part of these they have developed the largest 'appendix' of all animals, one from six to eight feet long.

~ Koalas are not found naturally outside Australia because they are so particular about their food. This habit may also threaten their well-being in Australia, particularly if they live on islands. Koalas may eat out all their favourite food plant until the trees die. If this happens, the koalas may die rather than eat any other kind of food. Such a tragedy occurred on Quail Island, an island off the coast of Victoria, about the year 1930. This island of three thousand acres was a sanctuary for koalas, as it contained plenty of Manna Gum which was their special food plant. The koalas bred so rapidly, however, and ate so many leaves that the trees died. Because of this many hundreds of koalas also died of starvation. Those that stayed alive had to be caught and taken to new areas where there was plenty of food.

After a koala has eaten all the leaves from a tree, it goes to another tree for food. When the first tree sprouts some new leaves, the koala may come back to this tree and eat all of these new leaves. If it does this several times, the tree will die. This is one of the reasons why there are usually many dead trees in an area where there are a lot of koalas.

At certain times of the year, particularly after heavy rain or after bushfires, these young leaves become very poison-



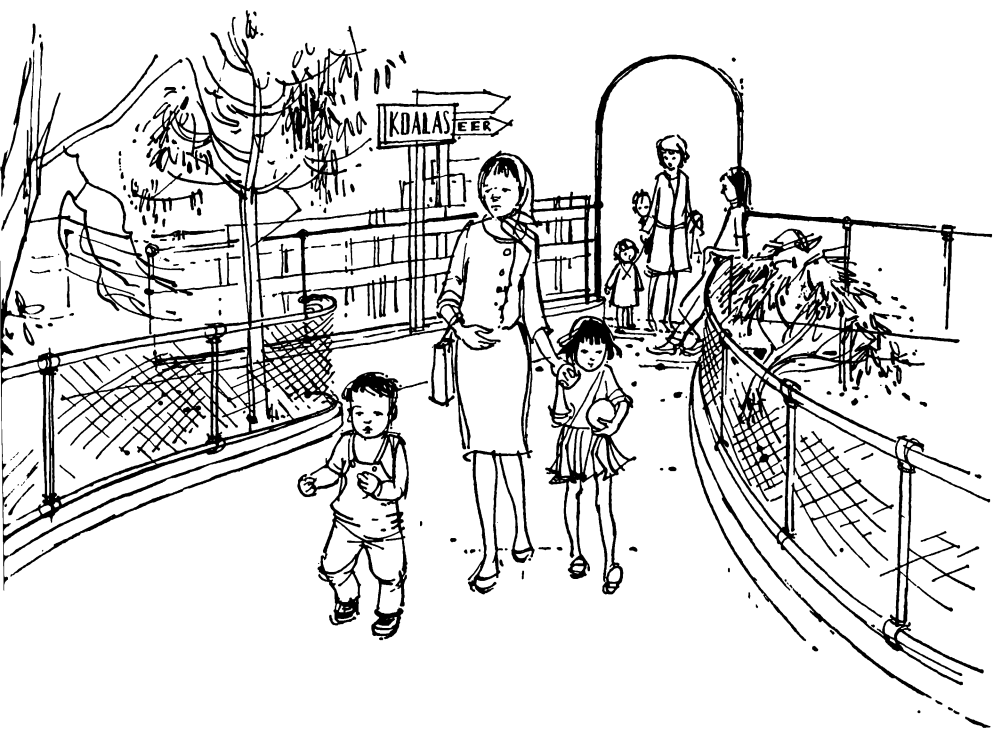
A. YOUNG LEAVES OF MANNA GUM
B. MATURE LEAVES WITH BUDS, FLOWERS AND FRUIT

ous. The koalas have some means of knowing when this happens, and will not eat them, waiting until all the poison has gone.

In many areas where koalas were once very prominent, hundreds of acres of eucalyptus trees have had to be cut down so that agricultural crops could be grown. Unfortunately in some cases all the trees were removed and no shelter breaks were left. This meant that the koalas that were there either died of hunger or had to be taken to other



areas. This happened on Phillip Island, off the coast of Victoria, some years ago when it became necessary to grow chicory. As well as clearing the land for growing the crop, the curing of the crop needed a vast quantity of firewood



KOALAS IN A ZOO

to stoke the kilns. The result was an island largely without trees, and of course most of the koalas had to be removed. Many thousands of trees of the right kind, however, have now been planted back on the island by school children,

boy scouts, and girl guides under the direction of a Government committee, and the koalas will soon be able to be brought back.

Even when koalas are starving they will rarely eat other plants. Sometimes they may eat a few leaves of cypress or banksia when in need of a change of food but this is not normal. They may at odd times lick up earth and chew it. This may give them the extra minerals they need and cannot get from the eucalyptus leaves alone.

Human foods are most unpleasant to koalas, causing chronic indigestion and in most cases killing them. This is one of the reasons why the Government will not allow them to be kept as pets. Anyone who does so now is severely punished. There was one koala many years ago who did become a family pet, and sat on a high chair at a table to eat his food with his mistress.

Koalas love to roam from one tree to another in search of food. They travel hundreds of yards looking for the right tree. If you try to stop this wandering around, they get very sulky, become sick and may die.

In the wild state, a healthy koala never drinks water. Some people say that the aboriginal meaning of the word 'koala' is 'drink no water', showing that the aborigines knew that this creature did not drink very much, if at all. They have been seen drinking water, even sea water, when they were sick or badly burned by fires. The koala mentioned



FIGHTING A BUSHFIRE

above who was a pet sometimes drank milk and even cold tea. They normally get all the liquids they want from the juices of the gum leaves and from rain and dew that sticks on the leaves

There is one legend that was told by the aborigines of Victoria to explain why koalas do not drink water.

This legend concerned a koala called Kur-bo-roo. He

was a wise old koala who was always consulted by the natives when they were in difficulties. One day he stole from the aborigines all their drinking vessels, drained out their creeks and made water so scarce that all the women and young children cried. In the end, they had no water at all for the men, women or children and they were in great despair. One of their spirits in the sky, seeing what was going on, came down to earth and called both the koalas and aborigines together to try and settle the quarrel. She settled their argument in this way. The aborigines could, in the future, eat the flesh of the koalas because it was good, but they must not skin them as they skinned common animals. The koalas, on the other hand, were not to steal drinking vessels or water from the creeks. They all agreed, and the natives and the koalas became good friends again. This is supposed to be one of the reasons why koalas do not drink water now.

The aborigines were always fond of the koalas for food purposes, particularly the young ones. But they would never skin one of these animals or even handle its skin because they thought it would bring them bad luck, and dry up all their water-holes.

Shortly after the first white man arrived in Australia, koalas were found in large numbers over quite a large area of the continent. They lived in the south-eastern and eastern areas from South Australia through to north Queens-

land. There were many millions of these animals at that time, sitting up in the tops of their favourite trees and hurting no one. Even seventy years ago, there were still millions of koalas in Australia.

But things changed quickly. Because fur traders wanted koala skins, some Governments gave them permits to kill these animals. In Queensland in 1927, over half a million koalas were slaughtered for their skins in August alone, while during the whole year, more than one million were killed.

Thousands were also killed by shooters as sport, and many died from disease. Around about the year 1900, from ten thousand to thirty thousand koala skins were being sent to London every year, and their value was only fivepence to one shilling each. These skins were used in the making of articles for which cheap and strong fur was needed.

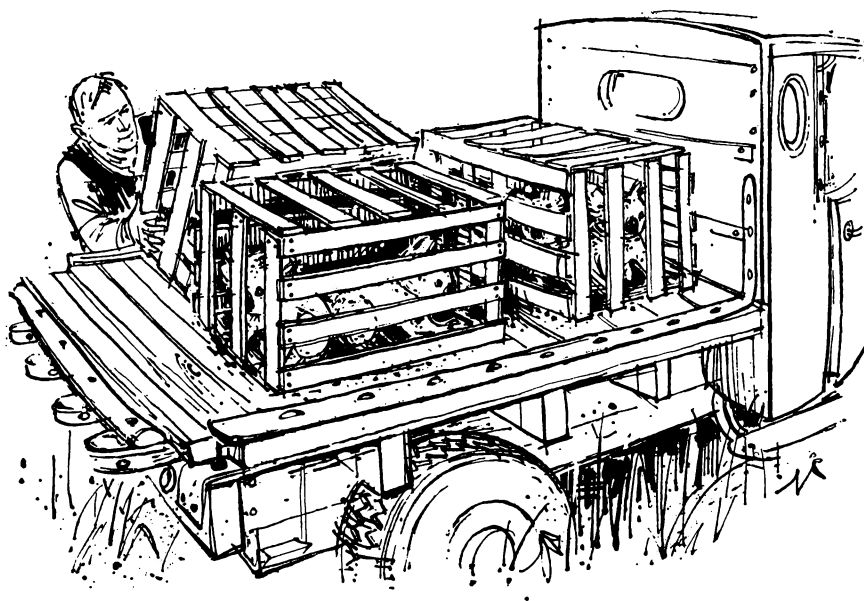
Because of all the deaths and killings, the koala had



SHOOTING KOALAS IN 1927

disappeared completely from South Australia by 1940, and had almost disappeared from New South Wales, too. The position in Victoria was also very desperate. The total number of koalas was less than one thousand and probably no more than five hundred. Most of these were at two places, one colony at Healesville on the mainland, and the other at Phillip Island, just off the coast. At that stage something drastic had to be done to prevent the complete disappearance of the koala. This was done by the Government Fisheries and Game Department, who taught people how to protect them and provided food trees for them. The position in Victoria is now corrected and there are many thousands of koalas to be found all over the State. In one year more than one thousand five hundred koalas were moved from Phillip Island to the mainland.

It was not easy to catch these koalas and take them away because so many of them were high up in trees. They were also frightened when they were being handled. The problem was solved however, by catching them in nets. They were moved from one place to another over the water and over the land in boxes or wooden crates. In this way they were not hurt, and on being released in suitable places scampered over the ground to the trees, climbed them and began feeding as though nothing unusual had happened. There is one special habit of the koala that helps in establishing them in a new area. As soon as they are set free in any place, they



MOVING KOALAS IN WOODEN CRATES

immediately run away one by one, and do not stay together in the one tree. This enables them to disperse very quickly and not eat out their food supply straight away.

Fossils found in caves on the Margaret River in Western Australia show that many thousands of years ago, koalas lived and flourished in that part of Australia also. Attempts have been made recently to reintroduce koalas into Western Australia, but it is not easy. Fossils have also been found in Queensland where a very large type of koala roamed the country in prehistoric times. This animal weighed over

five hundred pounds, and has been called *koalemus* which means a 'stupid fellow'. In Queensland there are still many koalas and though their numbers are not as great as they were, there is little danger of them dying out.

Many stories have been written about koalas. He has been seen on comic strips in newspapers; he has been used for advertising, and of course is one of the best known figures in the fur toy industry. He has also appeared on postage stamps. But best of all he has made the public of Australia love their animals and take steps to stop them becoming extinct. He has also brought many thousands of tourists to Australia, the only country in the world in which he can be seen alive in the trees around the countryside.

Life in Australia

Titles are constantly being added to this series. Books at present in print and in preparation are:

Australian Aborigines—R. M. Trudinger

Beaches—Neilma Sidney

Cattle Stations—Russell Gardner

Country Towns—Judith Wright

Fishing—Mavis Latham

Kangaroos—Edward Osmond

Koalas—Richard Pescott

Living in Cities—Maurice Brown

Lyrebirds—Graham Pizzey

The Murray River—Vaughan Craddock

Orchards—Brian James

Snow Country—Laura Neal

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